

MEDIA RELEASE

McAlester Army Ammunition Plant

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Ammunition plant firefighters rescue fellow employee from rising water

MCALESTER, Okla.-- When Ronnie McDonald, 70, left for work at 5:05 a.m. on March 19, he never thought he'd be spending the next couple of hours on top of his van watching water from Coal Creek fill it up.

An electrician at McAlester Army Ammunition Plant, McDonald didn't know he was in trouble as he traveled State Highway 31 from his home southwest of Stuart until he hit a wall of water and his engine died. "Then I knew I was in trouble," he said.

"I had always heard you didn't want to wade into swift running water so the first thing I did was to call on my cell phone for help," he explained. He intended to call his shop at work but pushed the wrong speed dial button and got his nephew who contacted his shop who relayed the call for help to the plant's fire department.



Close call—The van belonging to Ronnie McDonald, 70, from Stuart, Okla., is "parked" next to a clump of trees after McDonald drove into water flooding over Okla. State Highway 31 during a pre-dawn drive to work at McAlester Army Ammunition Plant where he is an electrician. Firefighters from the ammunition plant rescued McDonald, along with Pittsburg County District 3 Commissioner Randy Crone who is also a volunteer firefighter for Haywood-Arpear. (U.S. Army photo)

The plant's fire department called him right back and he gave them his location. Within 15 minutes a heavy rescue truck with four firefighters/emergency medical technicians (EMT) were on site. The pitch dark was no problem as they set up a light tower that illuminated the area with 6,000 watts, turning night into day.

“The air temperature was about 40 degrees and I knew Ronnie was wet and had been on top of his van for at least an hour. I was concerned, from a medical viewpoint, about Ronnie’s condition,” said Tracey Allen, the firefighter/EMT who actually rescued McDonald.

“When we arrived, the van was braced against a clump of trees and Ronnie was laying on top of the van,” said Izzy Pickens, acting captain from the ammunition plant.

In situations like this, most people think of a rushing torrent of water sweeping the vehicle off the road. In McDonald’s instance, this wasn’t the case.

“The water was flowing about 3 mph and was three to five feet deep. Basically it floated his van off the road,” Allen explained.

As soon as the plant firefighters arrived they thought they would need a boat but it ended up that volunteer firefighter Randy Crone, from Haywood-Arpellar, had a better idea. He had heard about the situation on the police scanner and arrived with an old 5-ton military truck.



Local heroes—Four firefighters from McAlester Army Ammunition Plant rescued a fellow employee, Ronnie McDonald, 70, from rising waters after he drove his van into the unseen danger during a pre-dawn drive to work. Standing in front of their rescue truck are: Izzy Pickens, Savanna; Tracy Allen, Wilburton; Lucas Mass, Hartshorne and Caleb Pierce, Kiowa. (U.S. Army photo by Mark Hughes)

Crone, who is also the Pittsburg County Commissioner for District 3, picked up firefighters/EMT Allen and Lucas Mass and drove through the deep water keeping parallel to the van.

Allen and Mass donned life jackets and rescue rope. Allen volunteered to enter the neck-deep water and side-stepped the 40 feet to the van.

Lucas, with the rescue rope in hand, stood on the 5-ton’s side board while Crone was the anchor. From the

“shore” to the van was about 400 feet.

Allen, who is 6’2”, said the water reached his neck, even though he was side-stepping on his “tippy toes.” He reached the van, checked McDonald for injuries and, finding none, suited up McDonald with an extra life jacket, attached the rope to the jacket and helped McDonald slide off the van into the water. Mass and Crone reeled them in.

Already McDonald was exhibiting the beginning of hypothermia with the loss of some feeling in his extremities, Allen said, and McDonald needed assistance standing up once they got to shore.

A Sheriff's patrol car was there and McDonald dried off and got in the warm vehicle where he insisted on being driven home. He took the rest of the day off. However, by the next day the water had receded and he had his van towed.

"I don't know if it's recoverable, but we're going to try," he said.

McDonald had nothing but praise for his rescuers. "I can't say enough about the fire department and Randy Crone. I'm proud of them all, they reacted well and did an excellent job."

For Allen and Maas, this was their first water rescue with the ammunition plant. "This rescue did show us that we needed more lifejackets, rescue rope and wet suits," said Allen.

They've been ordered and shipped. Hopefully it will be a long time before they're ever used.